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AUTHOR	Lewelling, Vickie
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ABSTRACT

The United States has a history of linguistic diversity and tolerance of other languages and cultures. Recent times, however, have seen the development of a movement to make English the official language of the United States (Official English Movement) by amending the constitution. Concern over the implications such an amendment could have for U.S. citizens and residents whose native language is not English led to the formation of an English Plus advocacy coalition of more than 50 civil rights and educational organizations. A summary of the goals of each movement and the effect that both have had on local and national policies is provided. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Linguistic Diversity in the United States: English Plus and Official English

by Vickie Lewelling, ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages & Linguistics

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At the time of Independence, colonial America was populated by speakers of many languages, including English, German, Spanish, French, Dutch, and Russian, as well as hundreds of American Indian languages. When the founding fathers decided not to declare an official language, their reasons included: a belief in tolerance for linguistic diversity within the population, the economic and social value of foreign language knowledge and citizenry, and a desire not to restrict the linguistic and cultural freedom of those living in the new country (Judd, 1987, p. 15). Though the issue of an official language has surfaced periodically throughout the United States' history, the issue was not raised in Congress until 1981, when Senator S.I. Hayakawa of California introduced a constitutional amendment to make English the official language of the United States. At first, the idea seemed to be primarily a symbolic gesture, giving English, the de facto language of the country, official status. Actually, the proposed amendment went further, calling for prohibition of state laws, ordinances, orders, programs, and policies that require the use of other languages. Neither the Federal government nor any state government could require any program, policy, or document that would use a language other than English.

Concern over the implications such an amendment could have for US citizens and residents whose native language is other than English led to the formation of an English Plus language advocacy coalition of more than 50 civil rights and educational organizations. In 1987, the coalition established the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) under the sponsorship of the Joint National Committee on Languages and the National Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Forum. EPIC's purpose is to fulfill the need for centralized information on language rights and language policy, to respond to efforts to restrict the use of languages other than English, and to promote an alternative to Official English.

What Is English Plus?

The English Plus movement is based on the belief that all US residents should have the opportunity to become proficient in English *plus* one or more other languages. For nonnative speakers of English, this means the opportunity to acquire proficiency in English and to maintain proficiency in their native languages. For native English speakers, this means the opportunity to become proficient in a language other than English while continuing to develop their English proficiency.

Proponents of English Plus view cultural diversity as a national strength and believe that it provides the United States with a "unique reservoir of understanding and talent"(EPIC, 1992, p.152). They support access to bilingual services and education and believe that such services will not in any way discourage language minority groups from learning English. In fact, evidence suggests that immigrant groups are very motivated to learn English. In a survey of 2,817 Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descent, more than 90% of the respondents said they believed US citizens and residents should learn English (Duke, 1992). Lack of opportunity, not lack of motivation, is the primary barrier to acquiring English proficiency. Ricento (1988) observed that, in Los Angeles alone,"40,000 prospective ESL students were turned away because there were not enough classes to accommodate them" (p. 4).

English Plus supports legislative measures designed to provide linguistic assistance to Americans who are not fluent in English. These include, for example, interpreter services in emergency situations such as 911; multilingual medical services; bilingual education and employment training; and multilingual driver's license exams. On the federal level, these include the bilingual provisions of the Voting Rights Act and the Court Interpreters Act. State provisions may also call for language services in civil courts and at migrant health and substance abuse centers."National unity and our constitutional values require that language assistance be made available in order to ensure equal access to essential services, education, the electoral process, and other rights and opportunities guaranteed to all members of society"(EPIC, 1992, p. 151).

What Is Official English?

The Official English movement seeks to make English the official language of the United States through passage of a constitutional amendment. Official English supporters argue that "in a pluralistic nation such as ours, government should foster the similarities that unite us, rather than the differences that separate us"(Wright, 1992, p. 129), and "unless we become serious about protecting our heritage as a unilingual society—bound by a common language—we may lose a precious resource that has helped us forge a national character and identity from so many diverse elements"(Chavez, 1987, p. 11). It is feared that providing education or services in other languages will give rise to ethnic separatism and lead to the breakdown of national unity, and that the only means of preventing such a rift is to adopt English as the official language.

The movement is spearheaded by English First, founded by Larry Pratt of Virginia, and US English, founded by the late Senator Hayakawa and John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist. U.S. English, the better known of the two groups, has over 400,000 members and an annual operating budget of $6 million. The group has helped state efforts to pass official English laws and has fought FCC licensing of Spanish language broadcasters.

The goals of the Official English movement are to encourage the process to ratify a constitutional amendment making English the official language of the United States; to repeal bilingual voting requirements; to reduce funding for bilingual education; to enforce English language and civics requirements for naturalization; and to expand opportunities for learning English (U.S. English, 1992).

Although English Plus supporters are in full agreement that proficiency in English is indispensable in American society and that opportunities must be provided for all US residents to learn

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English, they do not believe that an English Language Amendment will accomplish these goals. English is already the de facto language of the United States and needs no law to protect or promote its use. English Plus supporters argue that official English laws are counterproductive; they do not provide increased opportunities to acquire proficiency in English, but they do restrict the rights and access to essential services of individuals who are not yet English-proficient.

Bilingual Ballots

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 eliminated literacy requirements for voting because they were seen as a form of discrimination against blacks in the South. In 1975, to eliminate discrimination based on language proficiency, the House and Senate Judiciary Committees added the provision of election materials in languages other than English in jurisdictions where at least 5% of the population is American Indian, Asian American, Native Alaskan, or of Hispanic heritage. English Plus advocates maintain that "the right to vote is fundamental because it provides a means to preserve all other rights" (Trasviña, 1992, p. 263). Voting materials are written at levels as high as college English, whereas only about a third grade level of literacy is needed to pass the literacy test for naturalization. Many native born Americans, such as some American Indians and Hispanics in the Southwest, especially the elderly who were taught little English in school, may be unable to cast an informed vote in English.

Official English proponents argue that, in any event, people cannot cast an informed vote without knowing English. They fear that allowing non-English speakers to vote makes them prey to bloc voting by special interest groups. They argue that bilingual ballots are contradictory to citizenship laws, which require fluency in English, and inhibit the learning of English (Bikales, 1986).

Bilingual Education

Bilingual education programs use both the student's native language and English for instruction. In support of these programs, English Plus advocates cite research that emphasizes the positive influence native language development has on second language proficiency. The lack of first language development has been shown, in some cases, to inhibit the level of second language proficiency and cognitive academic development (Hakuta, 1990).

Krashen (1992) suggests that successful bilingual education programs actually result in faster acquisition of English. Content matter taught in the native language can be transferred to the second language. In the regular classroom, confronted with both concepts and language that are not comprehensible to them, limited English speakers learn neither the content nor the language. Research indicates that language acquisition occurs only when incoming messages can be understood.

Official English proponents, on the other hand, believe bilingual education programs advocate maintenance of native languages and cultures at the expense of English and encourage children not to learn English or become part of American society. They suggest that by teaching students English as quickly as possible, schools "make it clear to immigrant parents and children alike that mastery of English is indispensable for one's becoming a full member of American society"(English Language Amendment, 1984).

Official English and English Plus Legislation

The Official English movement has gained considerable attention over the past decade, but little success has been achieved at the federal level. Sixteen different amendments to the Constitution have been introduced since 1981. Although the Senate convened hearings on Official English in 1984 and the House did so in 1988, the English Language Amendment has never come to a Congressional vote.

Sixteen states, however, have either constitutional amendments or statutes making English the official language. States with amendments include Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, and Nebraska; those with statutes include Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Hawaii has passed an amendment declaring English and Hawaiian as official languages.

The English Plus movement has provided a means for advancing policies that support linguistic pluralism on the state and local levels. For example, New Mexico has adopted a resolution declaring that proficiency in more than one language is beneficial to the nation, that English needs no official legislation to support it, and that proficiency in other languages should be encouraged (New Mexico Legislature, 1992). Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington have also passed English Plus resolutions. Counties and municipalities that have endorsed English Plus include Atlanta, GA; Cleveland, OH; Dallas and San Antonio, TX; Globe, Hayden, Miami, Pima, South Tucson, Superior, and Tucson, AZ; Adams County, Boulder County, and Pueblo, CO; and Washington, DC.

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